

Researchers on what gives them hope

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Body

The news is often filled with doom and gloom about the environment, for good reason: we are in the middle of a climate change emergency and an extinction crisis. But the people on the front lines of these problems still find ways to get out of bed in the morning.

The Star asked climate and conservation scientists to look back at recent events, look forward to the future, and answer a simple question:

What makes you hopeful?

Their responses have been edited for length and clarity.

Kai Chan, professor at the Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability at the University of British Columbia

I'm inspired by the combination of the broad base of concern across a broad swath of Canadians (and others around the world), as well as the much more targeted and personally risky peaceful action of folks as in Extinction Rebellion. The fact that half a million people turned up for the climate rally in late September in Montreal was huge.

Similarly, the election provided a tangible reason for optimism for me. Even in the face of persistent and misleading claims about carbon pricing being a tax grab, a strong majority of Canadians voted for strong climate action - reaching carbon-neutrality by 2050, or even more stringent than that. We have yet to see how much can be accomplished towards that end given provincial politics, but it's something.

Dan Kraus, senior conservation biologist, Nature Conservancy of Canada

First, the tremendous growth we've seen in protected areas in Canada and around the world: places like Thaidene Nëné National Park Reserve and more of Ontario's Cockburn Island. Canada looks to be on track to meet protected area targets for 2020 and has now set even more ambitious goals for 2025. Perhaps just as important, recent surveys show that Canadians continue to support more land conservation.

Second, the Kirkland Warbler. After being on the edge of extinction, this songbird has slowly been recovering through a multitude of initiatives, and was removed from the U.S. Endangered Species list in 2019. This will certainly help to improve its status in Canada, but more importantly it shows that we can recover endangered species - including species that migrate, occur across large areas, and have habitat needs that could conflict with resource development. The recovery of this species should give us evidence of hope that we can stop the extinction crises, and that with the upcoming UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030), we may still have a chance to turn things around.

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Gillian Chow-Fraser, boreal program manager, CPAWS Northern Alberta

I am optimistic about the future of Indigenous leadership in conservation and protecting nature. In March 2019, the government of Alberta announced the establishment of Kitaskino Nuwenēné Wildland Provincial Park (which translates in Cree and Dene to "our land"), which contributes to the largest network of protected areas in the boreal in the world. It was initially proposed by the Mikisew Cree First Nation, who will help co-operatively manage the park, and helps protect a portion of the Ronald Lake Bison herd, one of the last disease-free herds of at-risk wood bison. There were also huge efforts for co-ordinated voluntary abandonment of leases by several energy companies within the park. From federally funded Indigenous Guardians programs across the country, to increasing proposals for Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs), we are just scratching the surface of Indigenous-led conservation initiatives.

Valérie Courtois, director, Indigenous Leadership Initiative

2019 was a good year for Indigenous stewardship. Twenty-seven proposed Indigenous protected areas received federal funding as part of Canada's plan to protect 17 per cent of lands by 2020. Once finalized, these areas will conserve over 50 million hectares of intact, healthy lands.

In August, the ʉtsēl K'e Dene First Nation signed an agreement to permanently protect 26,376 square kilometres of caribou grounds and boreal forest east of Yellowknife. The entire area, called Thaidene Nēné, is an Indigenous Protected Area, and parts are also designated as a national park, territorial park and wildlife conservation area. In November, the K'asho Got' n held a signing ceremony with the Government of the Northwest Territories to protect Ts'udé Nil né Tueyata, 10,000 square kilometres along the Upper Mackenzie River. And there are now over 60 Indigenous Guardians programs managing lands across the country. Guardians serve as "moccasins and mukluks" on the ground for their communities - testing water quality, monitoring development and managing protected areas.

The progress we've seen in 2019 makes me hopeful about the new year and the new decade ahead. With sustained, federal funding, more Indigenous nations will honour their cultural responsibility to care for the land. And that means more salmon and caribou, more clean water and carbon reserves and more healthy lands for all.

Sheila Colla, conservation biologist and professor, York University

People seem to still be very concerned about native pollinator declines. I'm thankful this is an environmental issue that remains top of mind among Canadians. In the city of Toronto, many amazing groups applied for the pollinator garden grant and the native pollinator plant giveaways were a huge success. In 2020, I hope we can continue to build on this enthusiasm to really start addressing main threats to our wild bees and the ecosystem services they provide, including climate change and introduced diseases from managed bees. Planting flowers will get us part of the way but there is still work that needs to be done to ensure the sustainability of our food systems and natural ecosystems.

Jeremy Kerr, university research chair in macroecology and conservation biology, University of Ottawa

Watching in alarm as decades of carefully worded warnings accomplished little, scientists are now speaking in stark terms about how perilously close the planet is to tipping points that could cause civilization to unravel. The evidence that tells us of the climate crisis also tells us how to avert it: reduce emissions and work hard on adapting to the changes we can't avoid. What leaves me feeling hope is that society seems to have reached its own tipping point, leaving no room for credible leaders to dodge responsibility to take decisive action. There is no alternative and precious little time remaining to do what must be done.

Jonaki Bhattacharyya, technical lead, Indigenous protected area planning, Dasiqox Tribal Park

As a conservation scientist working with Indigenous communities, I am fuelled by a love of wild places. Yet, like many conservationists, I work at the ragged edge of heartbreak. The spectre of grief over what has been lost, and what could be, looms close. What gave me hope? I was restored when I heard Gilbert Solomon sing, and the

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mountains sang back. Throughout 2019, Tsilhqot'in communities continued a decades-long struggle to protect a sacred area of their territory against the threat of unwanted mining activities. It is a dogged conservation struggle.

In October I attended a gathering of Tsilhqot'in friends and colleagues, marking five years since they announced their Indigenous Protected Area: Nexwagwez'an - Dasiqox Tribal Park. Out on their territory, a small group of people stood around a fire together, warming our hands amidst the first snow of the season. Gilbert, a Xeni Gwet'in knowledge keeper, sang and drummed as the group took a moment to give thanks for the gathering, for the land and water, for a meal, for each other. Gilbert is small in stature, but when he sings, his voice is powerful and pure. His drumming thrummed across the lakes with the beat of a relationship between people and place that is thousands of years old. The mountains seemed to receive his song, singing it with him. I am inspired by the resilience and determination of all the people working to protect that area; when Gilbert Solomon sang, I felt the spark of my own optimism renewed.

Aerin Jacob, conservation scientist, Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative

I think a lot about caribou: their soft velvety antlers, the clickety-clack sound when they walk, and the weird way they go up into alpine areas during winter to avoid predators. Once found across Canada, caribou populations have sharply declined in recent decades, largely because of habitat loss, fragmentation and disturbance. I worry about the extinction of one of our quintessentially Canadian animals.

Northeastern British Columbia's Peace Region is where I find hope for caribou. In March, West Moberly and Saulteau First Nations drafted an Intergovernmental Partnership Agreement with provincial and federal governments that outlines steps to recover mountain caribou, including the most important aspect: actually protecting habitat. Expanding the Klinse-za Protected Area means that some mountain caribou will have an island of safety in a sea of industrial development. It will also help to increase ecological connectivity to wild areas north and south, which is important as ecosystems adapt to climate change.

I am hopeful that the draft agreement will be signed soon - protecting caribou habitat can't wait, in the Peace or elsewhere. I hope that mountain caribou will recover to the point where Treaty 8 First Nations can exercise their treaty rights to hunt caribou again; this matters for reconciliation and conservation. The commitment and determination of West Moberly and Saulteau First Nations to keep caribou on the land gives me hope. If we're going to help Canadian wildlife to thrive, we need more action like this.

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